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SUBJECT: MINISTRY OF EDUCATION EDGES BLINDLY FORWARD ALONG APPROVED
MASTER PLAN

SUMMARY

1. (U) Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher's discussion with the Ministry of Education one day after the inauguration of President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov revealed the ministry's grudging acceptance of the president's stated intention to reform higher education and extend the years of secondary schooling, but a steadfast unwillingness to budge on curricular reform for secondary education. However, it appears the ministry is moving full steam ahead on all the promises President Berdimuhammedov made both during his campaign and at his inauguration. Minister Shemshat Annagylyjova, who was replaced only a day after the meeting with former Minister of Education Hydyr Saparliyev, appeared unable to grasp the changes taking place around her, but the entire ministry is hampered by a lack of understanding -- and lack of will to understand -- gaping deficiencies in its approach to reform. End Summary.

CURRICULUM REFORM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2. (U) Boucher led a large delegation consisting of the Charge, USAID Regional Director Chris Crowley, the USAID Country Director and A/PAO, into the meeting to demonstrate the importance the United States places on education. At Annagylyjova's left hand were Head of the International Department Nursahet Bayramov, Deputy Minister Jemal Bashimov and Staffing Chief for the Ministry Enebay Ovezova. Annagylyjova herself maintained a serene equanimity throughout the meeting, though Bayramov occasionally interjected. The minister vowed that the ministry would put "all its efforts" into implementing the president's educational plans as of September 2007: a return to 10 years of secondary school education, a 5 year curriculum at higher education institutes, and an increase in exchanges and foreign language learning opportunities. The ministry had already forwarded to President Berdimuhammedov plans formulated by "several large working groups" for changes to higher education curricula, as well as introduction of new foreign languages into secondary schools.

3. (U) Boucher asked whether the ministry had the "teachers, curriculum, and books" to implement these changes, to which the minister replied that implementing the 10-year framework was merely

a matter of redistributing the current hours of student classroom time so that students would sit in fewer hours of class daily and would not, she implied, go to school on Saturdays. (Note: The minister suggested -- inaccurately -- that Saturday was not a school day under the Soviet system and that students used to have only 6 hours of class per day as opposed to the current "7 to 8." End Note.) Boucher asked whether the ministry intended to "modernize" curricula, to which the minister responded that such changes would come only to higher education; one of the new working groups would comb the Internet for higher education curricula from other countries and would use these to revise Turkmenistan's current curricula. Boucher offered that post might provide a curriculum expert and that other assistance might be provided with current fiscal year funds, as long as post could reach an agreement with the ministry on such a program by April. The minister dissembled, saying that once the working group review was complete, the ministry might approach the embassy "if there is a need." For secondary school curricula, the minister volunteered -- in keeping with the president's campaign and inauguration promises -- that physical education would be reintroduced and that a new emphasis would be placed on foreign languages. The minister stated that specialized schools -- those which used to offer English before the state in 2006 mandated English in all schools -- would now also offer other foreign languages, such as Turkish, Arabic, French and German courses.

14. (U) Boucher offered that the United States was prepared and willing to work in tandem with European Union efforts to assist the host government's transition, especially in educational reform; the minister, vaguely aware that the ministry had worked with the EU in recent years, deferred to Bayramov, who said that the ministry had been "working intensely" with the EU-TEMPUS program to provide training programs and review higher education curricula. Boucher tactfully noted that the ministry had a "broad task" ahead, given

the desire to implement major changes to the educational system within eight months.

SOME ROOM TO MOVE ON INTERNET, EXCHANGES

15. (U) Shifting to a discussion of the Internet, Boucher noted that post hoped to reopen three Internet Access and Training Program (IATP) centers and the Turkmenbashi American Corner, which were all closed in Spring 2006, and eventually to expand to additional centers. (Note: The IATP sites at Ashgabat's National Library and at semi-governmental counterparts in Dashoguz and Balkanabat, and the Corner were all closed in May 2006 because of oblique government pressure. While the IATP sites were slated to reopen in March with new counterparts in Balkanabat and Ashgabat, post has had to wait for explicit Ministry of Foreign Affairs approval to reopen the Corner. End Note.) Annagylyjova stated that "all" of Turkmenistan's institutes of higher education were connected to the Internet, and that the libraries at the Agricultural Institute, Turkmen-Turkish University and Turkmen State University were completely wired for unfettered student access. Moreover, the ministry had proposed to President Berdimuhammedov wiring Turkmenistan's 71 youth palaces with Internet and establishing related extracurricular activities at the centers, which also served as community centers. The Charge offered that this was the first time post had heard of such centers. (Note: Post is aware of at least two such centers in Ashgabat -- holdovers from the Soviet period -- but they were not well-advertised and post is skeptical that they were focal points of the community as the minister seemed to suggest. End Note.)

16. (U) Annagylyjova then described the ministry's cooperation with the United Nations Development Program's Infotuk program. The ministry had "just received notice to open" the 27 schools where Infotuk had installed computer equipment several months ago. Charge interjected that post wanted to re-introduce to the ministry the opportunity for the Global Connections program (a program the ministry initially promised to consider and accept but then rejected outright, on the basis that Turkmenistan already had Infotuk and did not need additional such programs). As Boucher explained, the Global Connections program could be implemented in 20 schools initially, to expand over time. Annagylyjova replied that Infotuk would open in 27 schools "almost tomorrow" and that once this

rollout was complete, the ministry would be willing to discuss Global Connections. Boucher asked how many schools Turkmenistan had (2,000 secondary and 1,000 kindergarten) and observed that "there's a lot of room" for expansion from the 27 schools currently involved with Infotuk.

¶7. (U) Boucher related that President Berdimuhammedov had made positive comments about international exchange programs and in particular about the Future Leaders Exchange Program (FLEX). The United States was prepared to put forth more slots for such exchange programs or create such programs, but what kind of plans did the Ministry have in this area? The minister referred to late President Niyazov's approval of the FLEX program and to President Berdimuhammedov's promises to expand exchanges, and disingenuously claimed that the Ministry "worked closely with (Charge d'Affaires) Jennifer Brush" on the FLEX program. The ministry eagerly awaited the list of finalists for this year's competition in order to "do its best to bid farewell and good luck" to the departing students. The minister reiterated a ministry statement that the FLEX program yielded concrete results -- namely, fluency in English -- for those students who participated. Boucher agreed; the FLEX program was unique because of the host family component and there was "no other purpose" to the program than to provide exposure to the United States and to learn about the world. Along these lines, did the ministry have in mind any exchange programs of its own, funded perhaps with revenue from the sale of oil and gas? The minister and Bayramov referred to bilateral agreements between Turkmenistan and China, India, Turkey, Romania, Yugoslavia, Ukraine and Malaysia establishing student exchange programs that took Turkmenistan students to those countries. Turkmenistan's government selected the participants from its higher educational institutes according to the student's academic record and the student's commitment to "widening his outlook." The agreement granting Malaysia's Petronas the right to work in Turkmenistan also stipulated that 50 percent of the

revenues coming to Turkmenistan under the mutual agreement would fund a scholarship fund that took Turkmenistan students to Malaysia annually for oil and gas and chemistry studies. Already 50 students had graduated from the program and were working in Turkmenistan's energy sector.

¶8. (U) Boucher said he understood that the Turkmenabat Pedagogical Institute -- which he would visit on February 16 -- hosted students from Afghanistan. Bayramov clarified that 30 Afghan students annually attended the Institute for a year of preparatory Turkmen language training, after which they could attend a vocational or higher education institute anywhere in Turkmenistan, and take advantage of local student benefits such as stipends and dormitory privileges. Boucher commended such an effort, as the United States had also emphasized educational development in Afghanistan, where human capacity was severely underdeveloped. Annagylyjova, meanwhile, had praised the Institute lavishly as the only specialized teaching institute for secondary school teachers in Turkmenistan, and the base of efforts to "enrich the world outlook" of local youth. However, it was clear that the ministry was unaware of Boucher's intended visit to the Institute and discussion soon turned to assurances that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (representative Azat Niyazmuhammedov nodded, fatigued) would take care of the logistics of the visit. In closing, Annagylyjova breezily acknowledged that the ministry had much to do before September, but that -- God willing -- it would happen.

COMMENT

¶9. (SBU) President Berdimuhammedov's first decree as president, signed February 16 and given prominent coverage in all state media, extended secondary schooling to 10 years and higher education to 5 years. The Medical Institute and some arts institutions will expand to six years. Clearly, reform of the education system has become a key component of the social contract in this new political stage. And within educational reform, some reforms -- albeit still superficial at this stage -- are proceeding apace while others have shown no potential for movement, such as the need for curricular reform of secondary schools.

¶10. (SBU) Post is convinced that, even though Minister Annagylyjova was on her way out, her dismissal will not fix the ministry's

intransigence. Newly appointed Education Minister Saparliyev, for example, took a year before he would agree to meet with Charge. After Charge expressed her disappointment to MFA officials at Saparliyev's re-appointment, they assured her that his interim year as Ambassador to Armenia had been "life-transforming," and that she would be impressed by the change. End Comment.

BRUSH